

## Seeking Chemical Safety

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ONE CHALLENGE of homeland security is that most of the infrastructure that needs protecting is privately owned. How much protection do power plants, waterworks and pipelines need, and who should decide? The Senate may shortly face a subset of these questions in the form of a proposal to require tighter security for chemical plants and other facilities that handle or store hazardous materials. In this case, at least, the potential dangers are so frightening that voluntary measures by private interests are not enough. Congress should endorse federal standards and enforcement.

Sen. Jon S. Corzine (D-N.J.) is expected next week to offer an amendment to the homeland security bill that would require chemical plants and other facilities handling toxic materials to assess their vulnerability to theft or attack and draw up plans for reducing the likelihood and potential impact of any such event. The measure would require plants to consider not only upgrading security (fences, guards), but also changing procedures to reduce potential dangers. Such changes might include substituting less volatile or toxic chemicals for substances currently in use and storing less material on site. The administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, working with the homeland security chief and local officials, would have the authority to review the plans and order improvements. The proposal has drawn opposition from industry, whose representatives argue that it would delay voluntary improvements underway; they also object to giving the environmental agency authority over security measures.

The EPA already has substantial power under the Clean Air Act to assess the risks of accidental chemical release and to regulate the handling of hazardous substances. The legislation seeks to build on the agency's expertise and requires that the administrator consult with the homeland security chief both in deciding what facilities should be subject to the new law's regulations and in determining whether protections at individual facilities are adequate. It recognizes the work underway at some facilities by allowing owners to submit plans for approval without having to wait for new regulations to be completed. Backers have taken other steps to meet opponents' concerns, including adding safeguards to protect the confidentiality of critical information. What Congress should not do is deny the federal government a role in overseeing and enforcing security for hazardous substances. Millions of Americans live in areas that could be affected by accidents or sabotage at facilities handling dangerous chemicals. Since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, many companies have been working diligently to lessen vulnerability. But the public deserves a federal backstop to ensure that, where the risk is greatest, adequate safeguards are instituted and maintained.

